

year. Follow the fertilization guidelines provided by the soil test. This will prevent over-fertilization, will be cost-efficient, and will maintain healthy and productive trees. A leaf sample taken in July or August will determine the nutrient status of the tree and can be helpful in conjunction with the soil test. In addition to soil analysis and foliar analysis, regular observation of vegetative growth is a useful indicator of tree fertility. Optimum fertility exists if lateral, outward growth is between 12 and 18 inches per year.

If you are unable to take a soil test, a useful rule is to apply 1 pound of 10-10-10 fertilizer to each tree the first year, 2 pounds the second year, and 3 pounds the third year up to a maximum of 5 to 6 pounds for a mature tree. Always adjust rates of fertilizer application according to annual shoot growth. Apply fertilizer in late winter or early spring before growth begins. Fertilizer should be broadcast on the soil surface around the drip line of the tree. The “drip line” is the circular line at the outer ends of the branches. Avoid getting fertilizer within 6 inches of the trunk as it could burn the tree.

**Weed Control** - Controlling weeds and grasses around young apple trees minimizes competition for soil nutrients and moisture, encourages vigorous tree growth, and increases fruit size. It will also help to minimize damage from pine and meadow voles, and other rodents. Keep all vegetation controlled out to the drip line of the tree where the outer branches end. Do not use weed whips; these will girdle the tree without any visible signs of injury. Avoid mechanical weed cultivation, such as tilling, as it damages shallow tree roots. Herbicides are effective, but follow the label directions carefully and keep them off the tree. Mulch will also control weeds and conserve soil moisture, however rodents may burrow under the mulch and gnaw tree trunks and roots. When using mulch, place rodent guards around the base of the tree, and pull mulch back in the fall, leaving a 1-foot circle of bare soil surrounding the trunk.

**Disease and Insect Control** - Diseases and insects can cause serious damage to apple trees and fruit. Good sanitation practices are necessary to control pest problems. Cut out all dead or diseased wood, remove dried apples, and clear leaves and fallen

debris away from trees. Disinfect pruning tools with a 10% solution of a household disinfectant (Lysol) or bleach, before and after use and between trees. Household disinfectants, such as Lysol, will not corrode tools or ruin clothing. A regular spray program is essential for high fruit quality and healthy trees. Use a multipurpose fungicide and insecticide labeled for apples. These can be obtained from a garden center and will include application instructions. A spray to control fungus problems should be applied when the first sign of green tissue appears. A horticultural oil should also be sprayed on apple trees at the first sign of green growth in the spring to suffocate scale insects and reduce overwintering mite and aphid eggs. For homeowners with only a few trees, premixed orchard sprays are available from many garden centers. Begin applications after full bloom is over and spray every 10 to 14 days throughout the summer.

If you think you have an insect or disease problem, contact your County Extension Center immediately. It is important to identify the pest accurately so an effective treatment can be selected.

### **Harvesting and Fruit Storage**

Apples reach maturity at different times, depending on variety and climate. There is not a specific date at which you can expect to harvest your apples. Instead, you can observe your apples as they grow and inspect the fruit for certain changes which indicate maturity. The “ground” or base skin color of the apples changes from green to yellow as the fruit matures. Flesh color also loses its greenish tint and turns yellow or white. When you are convinced that the apples look mature, take a bite! A mature fruit will be crisp and juicy. A pleasing taste is the final indicator of fruit maturity.

Proper storage conditions help prolong the shelf-life of your apples. Store apples at 32°F and maintain high humidity. The crisper drawers of many refrigerators work well, but keep the fruit away from vegetables since ripening fruit gives off gas that may spoil vegetables. Apples can also be stored in plastic bags in the refrigerator to prevent fruit dehydration.

Always remember, “An apple a day...!”